

Understanding Juvenile Delinquent Behavior through Social Bonding

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Social control theory is often used to understand the many facets of social bonding opportunities and juvenile delinquency behavior. Various theories have been used to help explain delinquent behaviors and the reason for such actions against the community such as strain, differential association, social learning, symbolic interaction, and social control theories. However, social control theory and its four elements of social bonding (attachment, involvement, commitment, and belief) seem to be the most effective for understanding the dynamics of why young individuals participate in delinquency.

Four Constructs of Social Bonding

The four constructs of social bonding form very early in the education life cycle of a student, often middle school. Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) postulates that the higher the presence of these four constructs - attachment, involvement, commitment, and beliefs - the higher the level of social bonding. When Hirschi (1969) delineates his own four constructs of social bonding, he describes *attachment* as affection or close relationships with others. This element suggests that youth with stronger attachments are less likely to participate in delinquent activities and violate school and society rules and laws because they are actively engaged. The youth who does not feel attached to persons or entities within society may not be engaged in opportunities that build social bonds; thereby, they do not embrace society's, the parents', or the schools' values and norms, as they have less or no stake in the school.

The second major element is commitment. Hirschi describes this element as the investment made in conventional activities such as peer relationships and school activities. When youth invest time, energy, and personal resources into school, they are less likely to abandon it (Hirschi, 1969). Therefore, youth, and students of

middle-school age who feel committed and invested in school via academics, extracurricular activities, leadership opportunities, and relationships with a good teacher, friend, or peer group, may be less likely to disengage from school and engage in delinquent activities.

The third element is involvement. *Involvement* speaks directly to what individuals find themselves doing to keep busy and deterred from delinquent activities. The more they are invested and engaged in prosocial, structured activities (study habits), like school or leadership in a club or sports team, the less likely they are to engage in deviant activities. They simply do not have the time because they are invested in pro-social activities. However, when they cannot find or are not involved in conventional activities that bring them joy and where they feel like they belong and are needed, they are more likely to invest in unconventional activities. The last of the four elements of social bonding is belief.

Beliefs are often not formally written but still serve as the moral conscience of society and determine right from wrong. This speaks to the degree to which youth have

belief in the value of what society has to offer in the way of conventional activities and whether those ways and values are fair. Moral education is seen as having a direct effect on students’ decisions to participate in delinquency (Siegel & Senna, 2007). Many values are taught in the home and are often emphasized in the school and community arenas. The societal belief in the value of education is a key factor in choosing (or not choosing) to be delinquent. Many children engaged in delinquency do not yet believe that without an education they are bound to failure or will have limited opportunities.

Although to some, the four constructs may seem different and new, Lipsitz (1984) previously presented a similar framework for understanding children at this developmental stage. She pointed out that there are seven needs of middle school including 1) positive social integration, 2) meaningful participating in school and community, 3) physical activity, 4) diversity, 5) competence and achievement, 6) structure and clear limits, and 7) self-exploration. These seven needs articulate

specific steps schools can take to meet the needs of their students and assist in spelling out what Hirschi’s constructs represent.

For instance, *attachment* is clearly present when Lipsitz calls for positive social interaction with peers and adults, *involvement* when Lipsitz calls for meaningful participation in school and community activities, and *commitment* when Lipsitz asks that schools to provide opportunities for students to explore diversity and self-exploration and to show competence and achievement to meet their personal needs for connection. *Belief* is the last of Hirschi’s four constructs and is also addressed by Lipsitz’ needs. Lipsitz discusses the schools’ provision of clear limits, rules, and norms in the school’s organizational structure to help the child value school. Both Lipsitz and Hirschi offer different organizing frameworks to address the needs of adolescents (See Table 1).

Hirschi (1969) 4 Constructs	Lipsitz (1984) 7 needs of Adolescents
Attachment	Positive social interaction
Involvement	Meaningful participation in school and community, physical activity
Commitment	Diversity, competence, and achievement
Belief	Structure and clear limits, self-exploration

Table 1 – Organizing Framework Similarities

Applying the Theory to Understanding Delinquency

Social control theory is ideal for understanding delinquency because it has become one of the major theories in understanding delinquent and youth antisocial behaviors, in general (Eith, 2005). Hirschi (1969) determined that connections to people in the creation of a relationship are important factors in delinquency. In other words, social bonds matter. Hirschi posits, the absence of inhibition or the lack of strong positive relationships and the presence of weak social bonding, especially to school, facilitates engagement in various forms of antisocial behaviors (Brezina, Piquero, & Mazerolle, 2001; Hirschi, 1969; Sigfusdottir, Farkas, & Silver, 2004). A lack of opportunities for connection and social bonding is then purportedly linked to student disengagement and participation in delinquency. When these bonds are absent or weak, there is no one to influence the young person away from the negative behaviors; thereby, there is no bond to break (Brown et al., 2005; Glueck & Glueck, 1950). Toby (1957) has termed this lack of bonding as lack of *stakes in conformity*. Those who have less to lose because they are not attached or committed are more likely to take risks. Early social control theory espoused that this risk is based both on personal decisions to not comply and on labeling of the non-compliant behavior (Reiss, 1951). Ideally, there is a presumed correlation of social bonding to delinquency and engagement. However, this relationship may be impacted by certain societal, personal, and school demographics that help to create or inhibit this relationship (Eith, 2005).

For youth who are exploring their own identity and finding their own sense of self, opportunities for social bonding are an essential ingredient to their academic and future success (Brough, 1990; Brunσμα, 2006; DeMedio, 1991; Dorman, Lipsitz, & Verner, 1985; Eccles, Lord, Roeser, Barber,

& Jozefowicz, 1999; Jung & Gunn, 1990; Manning, 1993; Toepfer, 1988; Zins, Weissber, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Is the Change Individual or Community?

While social control theory proposes that strong personal bonds deter delinquency, it is also a theory driven by individual behavior, choice, and action. This brings into question the need to include community and structural community factors. The theory was not originally a way to answer why people break the norms of society, such as through delinquent activities, but why some people did not break those norms – a strengths perspective. Yet, researchers continue to refer to this theory as one of the first theories to examine social bonding as a primary predictor of delinquency, and the four constructs of social bonding identify protective factors for school-aged children, with influence from the family and community (Crosnoe, Erickson, & Dornbusch, 2002; Eith, 2005; Maddox & Prinz, 2003). Researchers like Hoffmann (2002) and Kornhauser (1978) suggest that social bonds are impacted by deteriorated structural and community-driven factors that further facilitate involvement in negative behaviors (Bursik & Grasmick, 1983; Peeples & Loeber, 1994). Evidently, the location where one lives and spends most of their childhood (the school environment over 6-8 hours a day) influences behavior (Catalano, et al., 1998; Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Goetz, 2003; Hawkins & Weis, 1985; Herrenkohl, Hawkins, Chung, Hill, & Battin-Pearson, 2001; Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2001).

In the literature on dropouts and chronic truancy, some of the variables that directly influence the behavior include interactions in the family, peer group, community, personal characteristics, religious community, and factors in the school environment (Geenen, Powers & Lopez-

Vasquez, 2001; Herrenkohl, et al., 2000; Johnstone, 2002; Mizelle, 1999; Roderick, 2003). In a longitudinal study, Werner and Smith (2001) added that emotional support needs to be provided to youth both in and outside the home. Support is emphasized because the students are experiencing many changes, both physical and psychological, and the results usually impact their scholastic ability (Gutman & Midgley, 2000; Johnstone, 2002; Werner & Smith, 2001). For example, “troubled youths who grew up in poverty, but who were socially and intellectually competent, profited more from naturally occurring opportunities that opened up for them into adulthood” such as mentoring (Werner & Smith, 2001, p.180). Similarly, the Chicago Youth Development Survey suggested that poor family functioning, impoverished communities, and limited social networks can be mitigated by strong school support and students’ social bond to the school (Sheidow, et al., 2001).

In the end, some studies have argued that students most at-risk, living in poverty-stricken communities, and from single-headed or poor functioning families are less likely to succeed (Clark, 1994; Clark & Clark, 1984; Fine, 1991). The reality is that with a supportive community and with appropriate measures of creating stakes for a child to stay in school, value school, and be committed and attached to what school represents, any child can be successful regardless of previous situations and background. Clearly, social bonding manifests itself in various ways and accounts for many factors that may explain why some youth engage in delinquency. We see this through truancy and dropout but we can make a difference if we look beyond the truancy and drop out numbers and begin to respond to the needs of our children as they grow and learn. Education is still the key, but social bonding matters. Student Bond = Student Success.



Cyntoia Brown was born to an alcoholic, teenage mother who was also a victim of sex trafficking. Cyntoia experienced a sense of isolation, low self-esteem, and alienation that drove her straight into the hands of a predator. She became a victim of sex trafficking and at the age of 16 was arrested for killing a man who had solicited her for sex. She was tried as an adult and was sentenced to life in prison without chance of parole for 51 years.

She will be our featured speaker at this year’s 109th Annual IATDP conference. Cyntoia hopes that her story will inspire others and shine a light on the injustice that people still face on a daily basis, especially the injustice to women and children in American prisons. Register today to share in this experience.

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